



Two types of psychological hedonism

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ABSTRACT

I develop a distinction between two types of psychological hedonism. *Inferential* hedonism (or “I-hedonism”) holds that each person only has ultimate desires regarding his or her own hedonic states (pleasure and pain). *Reinforcement* hedonism (or “R-hedonism”) holds that each person’s ultimate desires, whatever their contents are, are differentially reinforced in that person’s cognitive system only by virtue of their association with hedonic states. I’ll argue that accepting R-hedonism and rejecting I-hedonism provides a conciliatory position on the traditional altruism debate, and that it coheres well with the neuroscientist Anthony Dickinson’s theory about the evolutionary function of hedonic states, the “hedonic interface theory.” Finally, I’ll defend R-hedonism from potential objections.

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1. Introduction

The English philosopher and political theorist Jeremy Bentham wrote, in 1780, “Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure.” (Bentham, 1789 [1780]). Since that time, many philosophers have taken Bentham’s dictum as a classic statement of the view called psychological hedonism (in contrast to ethical hedonism) (see Feinberg, 1987, 1; Sober & Wilson, 1998, 1; Stich, Doris, & Roedder, 2010, 152 [fn. 10]). Yet this dictum contains a fundamental ambiguity, one that has not yet been recognized. Let *A* be an agent, and *D* some desire that *A* has—a desire other than the desire that *A* obtains pleasure or avoids pain.¹ In order for *A* to have *D*, must *A* believe that satisfying *D* will contribute to pleasure? Or is it enough that the satisfaction, or even the mere existence, of *D* is, in fact, pleasurable, and this fact causes the desire to persist?

I will call the first kind of hedonism “inferential hedonism,” for reasons to be explained in the next section. (Alternately, I will just refer to it as “I-hedonism.”) I-hedonism holds that for any agent, *A*, and for any desire, *D*, *A* has *D* only because *A* believes that the satisfaction of *D* will promote *A*’s pleasure. In this view, in order for

A to desire something other than pleasure, then, *A* must possess certain beliefs about the relationship between the satisfaction of that desire and pleasure. In most cases, these will be causal beliefs (i.e., that the satisfaction of *D* will cause pleasure). They can also be “constitutive” beliefs, that is, beliefs to the effect that satisfying *D* is constitutive of pleasure (e.g., my belief that health is somehow constitutive of happiness). This is the kind of hedonism that philosophers are typically thinking about when they discuss psychological hedonism.

I will call the second kind of hedonism, “reinforcement hedonism” (or, alternately, “R-hedonism”). R-hedonism holds that, where *D* is an ultimate desire, *D* is maintained or reinforced in *A*’s cognitive system only by virtue of the fact that *D* is associated with pleasure. When I say that *D* must be “associated with” pleasure, I am thinking of two different sorts of cases. In the first case, the satisfaction of *D* (regularly, typically, or non-negligibly) causes, or is constitutive of, pleasure. In the second case, *A* derives pleasure merely from *entertaining* the satisfaction of *D*. According to R-hedonism, it is possible for someone to have a long-standing, ultimate desire that is never satisfied, such as a desire for revenge or a desire for world peace. The R-hedonist simply maintains that such desires are reinforced because the agent derives pleasure from imagining their being satisfied. A monk can have a lifelong, unfulfilled, and ultimate desire for sex. The R-hedonist says that the only reason this desire is reinforced is because the monk derives pleasure from

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¹ In the following, I’ll use the term “pleasure” as an abbreviation for, “pleasure, or the avoidance of pain.”

contemplating its satisfaction. When I contemplate satisfying a desire, and I get pleasure from that, that sets up a kind of “virtual reinforcement scheme” that causes the desire to persist. (Note that the R-hedonist is not committed to the claim that all desires are reinforced only by virtue of their association with pleasure, but only that “ultimate” desires are reinforced this way. “Instrumental” desires are maintained simply by virtue of the agent’s beliefs about the relation between the instrumental and ultimate desire.)

Another way of framing the distinction between I-hedonism and R-hedonism is in terms of the distinction between the *content* of a desire, on the one hand, and the *mechanism* by which that desire is reinforced in the cognitive life of the agent, on the other (or, alternatively, the *function* of that desire—see below). I-hedonism is a theory about the contents of one’s ultimate desires. It claims that one only has ultimate desires about one’s own hedonic states. R-hedonism is a theory about the mechanism by which those desires are maintained or reinforced over time—namely, by virtue of their actually being associated in the right sort of way with one’s hedonic states. According to R-hedonism, people can have ultimate desires regarding the welfare of others. R-hedonism just holds that, if those desires were not, in fact, associated with pleasure, they would soon disappear. LaFollette (1988) suggested a similar distinction, though he did not consider the latter view to be a variety of hedonism and he did not focus narrowly on pleasure, per se, as the sole reinforcement mechanism, but rather what he called “satisfaction.”

One purpose of the following is to clarify the distinction between the two types of hedonism, and to situate the distinction in relation to the traditional altruism–egoism debate. It is not merely, however, an exercise in conceptual clarification. A second goal is to provide some biological and psychologically plausible reasons for rejecting I-hedonism and accepting R-hedonism.

The following consists of six sections. After the introduction (Section 1), I will clarify the distinction between I-hedonism and R-hedonism, particularly with respect to the traditional egoism–altruism debate (Section 2). In Section 3, I’ll review Sober and Wilson’s (1998) evolutionary argument against I-hedonism and explain why I find it convincing. In Section 4, I’ll provide an empirically-oriented argument for R-hedonism, namely, that it receives support from the neuroscientist Anthony Dickinson’s theory about the biological function of pleasure. In Section 5, I will defend R-hedonism against a host of potential objections. In the final section, I’ll make some concluding remarks and gesture toward some further lines of inquiry.

2. I-hedonism and R-hedonism

The distinction between I-hedonism and R-hedonism is best understood in the context of the traditional altruism–egoism debate. The traditional altruism debate emerges at the intersection between two distinctions: that between “ultimate” and “instrumental” desires, and that between *self*-directed and *other*-directed desires. To understand the altruism debate, in its traditional form, one must understand these two distinctions (see Garson, 2015, Chapter 1 for an overview).

Let *A* be an agent, and *D* be some desire that *A* has. *D* is an *instrumental* desire if and only if the only reason *A* has *D* is that *A* believes the satisfaction of *D* will promote the satisfaction of some other desire, *D'*. (When I say one desire “promotes the satisfaction” of another, I mean either that the satisfaction of the first causes the satisfaction of the second, or that the satisfaction of the first is somehow constitutive of the satisfaction of the second.) *D* is an ultimate desire if and only if it is not instrumental. Another way of approaching the distinction is by imagining that an agent’s desires form a ladder-like hierarchy. *A*’s “ultimate” desires are simply

those at the top of that hierarchy. Ultimate desires would continue to exist even if the agent did not believe that their satisfaction would promote the satisfaction of others. Note that an agent can have more than one ultimate desire. It is also possible that an agent’s ultimate desires conflict with each other. Finally, an agent’s ultimate desires can change over time; a desire can “convert” from being instrumental to being ultimate, or vice versa.

Note that I do not have a special theory here about what constitutes a belief or a desire. For example, must desires be something like propositional representations? Must the agent’s beliefs have the right sorts of formal or syntactic structure in order to constitute genuine beliefs? That would exclude most non-humans, and even some human beings, from having “beliefs.” Or, can these beliefs be more rudimentary belief-like states, for example, along the lines of what Kim Sterelny calls “decoupled representations” (Sterelny, 2003, Chapter 3)? Clearly, slightly different versions of I-hedonism can be generated depending on how one explicates the notions of belief and desire.

The distinction between *self*-directed and *other*-directed desires is a distinction regarding the *contents* of a person’s desires, that is, what they are about. *D* is *other*-directed for *A* if it is about the welfare of some other agent, *A'*. *D* is *self*-directed for *A* if the desire is about *A*’s welfare. Note that a desire can be both *self*- and *other*-directed, such as my desire that *my wife and I buy a house*. Moreover, a desire can be neither *self*- nor *other*-directed, such as a desire that *the universe persist forever*. (Of course, people might disagree about what constitutes “welfare,” and I have no special theory here. I hope that the examples serve to illustrate, at least roughly, the distinction I am trying to capture.)

Putting these two distinctions together, one can formulate the traditional altruism–egoism debate. The traditional egoist holds that *all ultimate desires are self-directed*. For example, the traditional egoist maintains that people only have ultimate desires for things like happiness, health, wealth, respect, or power. This position does not imply that people never have *other*-directed desires. The egoist simply holds that, to the extent that they do, those desires are instrumental and not ultimate. The traditional altruist holds that, perhaps in addition to ultimate, *self*-directed desires, people sometimes have ultimate, *other*-directed desires.

Traditionally, hedonism is construed as a special variety of egoism (this is the variety of hedonism that I will refer to as “I-hedonism” for reasons to be explained in the next section). For the traditional hedonist, all ultimate desires boil down to the desire for pleasure. People clearly do have desires for things like wealth, health, or power, but only because they believe that those things will contribute to pleasure. Hedonism, in this sense, strikes me as the most plausible form of egoism. That is because it is hard to see why somebody would want things like power, wealth, and so on, unless that person believed that having those things would feel good, or be pleasurable. Of course, the question of what exactly “happiness,” or “pleasure,” or “feeling good,” amounts to, is an empirical question that will be progressively illuminated by psychology and neuroscience (see Kringsbach & Berridge, 2010 for a good starting point on the neuroscience of pleasure). It strikes me as unfair to demand that the hedonist provide a perfectly lucid account of what, precisely, “happiness” or “pleasure” amounts to, prior to the development of the relevant empirical research program.

Having set up the structure of the traditional altruism debate, one can now distinguish easily between two types of hedonism. “Inferential” hedonism, or I-hedonism, is just traditional hedonism. It is the view that people only have ultimate desires regarding their own pleasure. I call it “inferential” hedonism because it emphasizes the inferential role that ultimate desires play in generating new (instrumental) desires. Ultimate desires, in this view, interact

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